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In His Intelligent Image **by Debbie L. Moreland**

“You left church work to do WHAT? Teach PHILOSOPHY? And at a SECULAR college? But what about your faith?” I don’t hear it as often now as when I first changed vocations, but sometimes I can still see the question marks in the faces of new acquaintances.

On one particular occasion I was the second of two speakers at a Christian student conference on a public college campus. I planned to speak on “A Philosophical Look at the Gospel.” Uncomfortably, the pastor who was scheduled before me spoke on the evils of philosophical thought. Ouch! He used Colossians 2:8 as his text: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.”

Of course, that devout lover of Jesus was only trying to protect believing college students from the ideological pitfalls that so many young adults encounter in the spiritual wasteland of higher education. What this well-meaning pastor lacked, however, was a holistic biblical worldview out of which to understand this verse. It was only a few years earlier that I had misunderstood this text in exactly the same way.

Like many believers, I learned to study the Bible one passage at a time. We looked at this verse or that, taking each at face value. Sure, we were taught to look at verses “in context,” but only in the contexts of the passages or historical events in which they occurred. I don’t remember being taught to look at portions of Scripture in light of the entire biblical narrative; and if ever we did that, the Christian story most certainly started in Matthew, not in Genesis.

So, like many serious Christians, I read Colossians 2:8 and believed philosophical thought to be evil. I read Colossians 3:2, “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things,” and thought I should avoid the activities and institutions of physical life. I read Matthew

6:33, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well,” and thought I should obsess about heaven and resign myself to poverty. I read the Great Commission and thought it was only about saving souls for the Great Beyond.

Reading passages outside the context of the larger biblical story inappropriately defined the way I could understand each text, so I misunderstood much of what I read. Like many other lovers of God, my most devastating misunderstandings caused me to become so heavenly minded that I was no earthly good, because that’s what I thought faith required of me.

But I discovered that I’m part of a story that starts at the beginning, not in the middle. It’s a story about the Creator who placed his image in this peculiar bunch of creatures so that he might reveal himself through us to all the creation. It’s a story about how he allowed us to deface that image in ourselves, so that he could display his redemptive nature by rescuing us. It’s a story about those people who would let God restore his image by causing the ultimate Image of God to trade natures with us and crucify ours. It’s a story about God reconciling the entire creation to himself through relationship with his renewed image bearers. It’s a story about Goodness himself demonstrating his compassion, justice, mercy, and forgiveness to all he had made by engaging in a redemptive plot with us—with me! The story of the Hebrews and of the early Church is not about a mysterious “they.” It’s my story, our story.

If our story is about image bearing, then we must discover who God is and be his body in the world. Thus, my understanding of biblical ethics quickly became less about rules and more about virtue, defined by the very character of God. But then I discovered that God is not only spiritual and moral in the story. He is also intelligent, creative, communicative, social—He’s even good at resting! That makes intelligence creativity, communicability, society, and even rest, holy because that is who Yahweh is. If we neglect to develop these aspects of our humanness, then we disrespect who God is and fail in our imaging task.

The larger biblical story also tells of a creation that is no more fallen than the human soul, and that is being redeemed, just like the human soul. The narrative does not despise the physical state, nor does it leave the earth in the hands of fallen people or Satan. It gives humans the task of cultivating, and tells a tale about recovering the creation for God's reign. Could God have wanted us to help him rescue expressions of himself in the world—in politics, the arts, academia, leisure, and intellectual pursuits? The roots of such activities are found in God's own character, and they are found before the Fall in the biblical plot, so my guess is they'll be found in one form or another in heaven, too, and we should be busy redeeming them.

So, if the biblical story reveals that the physical creation is being rescued, that God is much bigger than morality, and that I am primarily to image God, then I may have misread those isolated biblical passages. What if Colossians 3 isn't talking about avoiding institutions of the physical reality, but about avoiding the sin that is thereafter listed as belonging to our "earthly nature"? What if Matthew 6:33 isn't talking just about heaven but about the rule of Christ in the world? What if the Great Commission is about more than saving souls for the hereafter and is a retelling of the Genesis 1:26-28 command to multiply image bearers? And what if Colossians 2:8 isn't talking about intellectual thought being evil, but only "hollow and deceptive" thought?

If this is true, then people should recognize and avoid "hollow and deceptive" thought by mimicking God's own intelligence and wisdom. Why do we miss it when Philippians 4:8 tells us, "Whatever is true . . . think on these things"? And why do we often ignore the last item in Matthew 22:37, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind"? If we're supposed to be thinking about truth and loving God with our minds, then how did academia become the "spiritual wasteland" I earlier labeled it? If God himself is intelligent and logical, then why does philosophical thought—or scholarly thought in general—seem less than holy?

Maybe it's only because theists abandoned logical thought to godless minds a century (or three) ago. Maybe real evangelism involves leading the mind into the Kingdom as well as the spirit. Maybe someone should be teaching the world to think well, to be "lion tamers of ideas," as G. K. Chesterton put it. Maybe some of us should carry the image of God into godless places and rescue human minds for intelligent discourse in the new creation. Maybe some people are "called" to academia (or the arts, or politics, or sports and leisure), just as some are "called" to the ministry. Maybe our churches should be mindful of the holy need for intellectual imaging.

After I spoke that night, the pastor who preached on the evils of philosophy apologized for his use of the text. We made friends and had a hearty chat about the biblical narrative. I suspect this gracious man is now encouraging the minds of his congregation as well as their spirits. And me? I'm now happily making disciples of all nations and teaching them to obey everything Jesus commanded by bringing the intellectual integrity of the Kingdom into philosophy classrooms full of minds seeking truth.

About The Author

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